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SOVIET ANNOUNCES A GRANT OF ASYLUM TO EX-C.I.A. AGENT

He Vanished in September —
Concern Over U.S. Security
Voiced in Washington

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Special to The New York Times

MOSCOW, Aug. 7 — The Soviet Union said today that it had granted asylum to a former employee of the Central Intelligence Agency who disappeared last September under suspicion of selling secrets to Moscow.

According to the Government press agency Tass, the former C.I.A. man, Edward L. Howard, told the Soviet authorities in seeking asylum that he had "to hide from the U.S. secret services, which were persecuting him without foundation."

In Washington, officials said Mr. Howard's defection and his disclosures about what he knows about American intelligence had done immeasurable damage to national security.

U.S. Feared Defection to Soviet

Since the night in September when he abandoned his family and fled into the New Mexico desert, American intelligence officials have feared that Mr. Howard would reappear in the Soviet Union and reveal intelligence techniques.

Senator Patrick J. Leahy, the Vermont Democrat who is vice chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence, said: "Certainly if a C.I.A. agent defects to the Soviet Union, it damages us. It is a matter of concern to all of us."

Mr. Howard is believed to be the first C.I.A. employee to defect to the Soviet Union. In 1960, two employees of the National Security Agency, Bernon F. Mitchell and William H. Martin, turned up here. Another employee of the National Security Agency, Victor Norris Hamilton, defected in 1963.

'Humanitarian Considerations'

In the Howard case, a brief Tass announcement said, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet was "guided by humanitarian considerations" in granting asylum. The Presidium is the Soviet Union's collective presidency, headed by Andrei A. Gromyko. The report gave no other details.

The whereabouts of Mr. Howard has

been unknown since last September, when he disappeared from his home outside Santa Fe, N.M. He was working as a budget analyst for the New Mexico Legislature at the time.

His disappearance was an embarrassment for the C.I.A. and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which had been investigating his links to the Soviet Union at the time. F.B.I. agents had his home under surveillance when he eluded them on a moonless night.

Mr. Howard was suspected of giving the Soviet Union information about C.I.A. activities in Moscow that he had acquired while training for an assignment here. He was never sent to Moscow, and he left the C.I.A. in June 1983.

American intelligence officials have described his links with the Soviet Union, which are believed to have begun after he left the agency, as damaging to C.I.A. operations here, including the work of agents and their handling of Soviet informants.

Mr. Howard's move to the Soviet Union brings full circle a Byzantine spy case that began last year with the apparent defection to the West of Vitaly S. Yurchenko, identified by the C.I.A. as a senior officer of the K.G.B., the Soviet intelligence agency.

Named by Yurchenko

American officials said last year that Mr. Yurchenko had identified Mr. Howard as a Soviet double agent. Mr. Yurchenko made a dramatic return to the Soviet Union in November, contending that he had been kidnapped and tortured by the C.I.A.

Mr. Yurchenko also told the Americans that Ronald W. Pelton, a former

employee of the National Security Agency, had provided the Soviet Union with secret information. Mr. Pelton was convicted in June of having sold secrets to Moscow.

There is continuing dispute whether Mr. Yurchenko was a genuine defector who later changed his mind, or an agent sent to the West to disrupt intelligence operations.

American officials said in October that Mr. Howard might have helped the Soviet authorities apprehend a Soviet citizen who was providing military information to the United States. Mr. Howard, according to the officials, provided information that led to the arrest of the Russian, A. G. Tolkachev.

Mr. Howard, after disappearing in September, was variously reported in Central and South America and in Europe. One report traced him to Finland,

but there was no confirmation. He had worked for the C.I.A. from January 1981 to June 1983.

The Washington Post said recently that while Mr. Howard was training for an assignment in Moscow, he was given information about how agents operate, but not the names of agents.

The Post said his assignment had been canceled after he failed to pass a lie detector test and was found to have a drinking problem.

After he was dismissed in 1983, he moved to Santa Fe with his wife and son, taking a job in the New Mexico Legislature.

American officials have said they believe he began selling information to the Soviet Union in 1984 and made several trips to Europe to meet with Soviet agents.